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Perchlorate plume spreads, 2 more wells close

CONTAMINATION: Inland water officials lobby for help in Washington after the Rialto shutdown.

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THE PRESS-ENTERPRISE

A chemical that makes rockets fly is continuing to play havoc with Inland drinking water supplies, this week forcing Rialto to shut down two wells because of the expanding plume of contamination.

"We're losing 10,525 gallons per minute," said Peter Fox, Rialto's water superintendent. "That's quite a bit. . . It's always disappointing to take something out of service due to a contaminate."

The expanding perchlorate plume in the Rialto, Colton and Fontana areas has so far forced Rialto to close five of the city's 11 drinking-water wells. The chemical used to make munitions, propellants and fireworks has so far contaminated at least 20 wells in the area, state water officials said.

The pollution is believed to have come from weapons and fireworks that were made or

stored in the area starting during World War II. If ingested, perchlorate can damage thyroid function.

Washington delegation

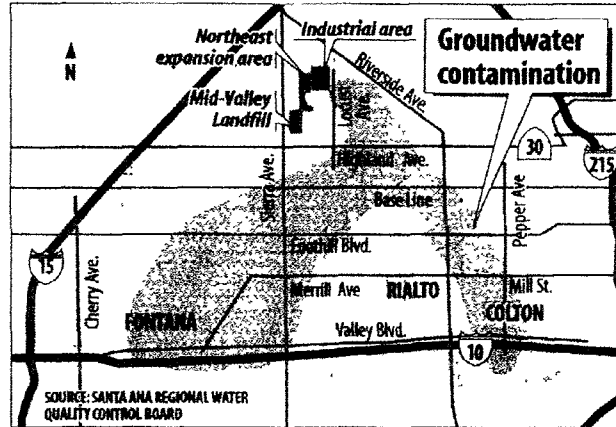
The expanding toxic plume prompted a delegation of Inland water officials to visit Washington this week. They lobbied congressional aides and federal agencies for funds to clean up the pollution and treat or replace contaminated water. Federal officials shared some of the concerns.

"They recognized that we have an immediate crisis," Bradley Baxter, Rialto's Public Works director, said Wednesday. Baxter was with the delegation.

Rialto has been hit hard by the plume, Fox said.

The city decided to take two more wells out of service Monday when he received test results showing perchlorate levels at 46 parts per billion, just above the state's action level of 4 parts per billion.

Despite losing the wells, the city has not had to interrupt water service to residents. Rialto continues to pump from its other wells and has agreements to



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receive water from other providers, Fox said.

He pointed out that at least one other well is in the path of the plume.

In Washington, San Bernardino-area water providers also met with Department of Defense officials. They acknowledged that former Inland military installations are among many nationwide that need to be cleaned up.

Defense officials also said they would help in locating emergency funding, Baxter said. This could be accom-

plished through U.S. Environmental Protection Agency grants, he added.

The Inland water officials are worried that they won't be able to meet the demand for drinking water next summer, when water usage is at its highest.

The delegation included representatives from Fontana Water Company, Colton and the West San Bernardino County Water District.

They seek money to clean up the plume and to replace or treat water that's been contaminated in at least eight wells. Treating the eight wells would

cost about \$18 million over one year, they said.

The group met this week with staff members for Reps Joe Baca, D-Rialto, and Ken Calvert, R-Corona. They also spoke with staff members for California Sens. Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer, and with officials from the Departments of Agriculture, Transportation and the EPA.

Perchlorate source

State water officials have said the perchlorate might be coming from the county's Mid-Valley Landfill in Rialto, as well as several businesses in the area. The landfill was expanded onto land that once had World War II-era munitions bunkers where weapons and fireworks were stored. The problem might have been exacerbated by a gravel-washing operation at the landfill that was halted last month, said Kurt Berchtold, assistant executive officer for the state's Santa Ana Regional Water Quality Control Board.

San Bernardino County government officials were not among the delegation in Washington.

The county has said the bunker site and the landfill have not

been proven to be the source of perchlorate contamination.

David Wert, the county's spokesman, said the county is interested in federal support for cleanup efforts. But he said no one knows yet the scope of the problem and what type of treatment is necessary.

The county is spending more than \$1 million to test water and soil in the area in hopes of defining the problem. Test results are expected in another month.

State water officials have ordered the county and five companies to develop work plans to investigate the perchlorate contamination.

The companies had handled fireworks, munitions or rocket propellant in areas that could be sources of the pollution, Berchtold said.

Another 25 companies are under investigation.

"Perchlorate contamination is fast becoming a crisis in the Inland Empire. We cannot be closing down wells when we are already experiencing a drought and shortage," Baca said.

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